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### The “why” and “how” of narcissism

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# The “Why” and “How” of Narcissism: A Process Model of Narcissistic Status Pursuit

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## Abstract

We propose a self-regulation model of grandiose narcissism. This model illustrates an interconnected set of processes through which narcissists (i.e., individuals with relatively high levels of grandiose narcissism) pursue social status in their moment-by-moment transactions with their environments. The model shows that narcissists select situations that afford status. Narcissists vigilantly attend to cues related to the status they and others have in these situations and, on the basis of these perceived cues, appraise whether they can elevate their status or reduce the status of others. Narcissists engage in self-promotion (admiration pathway) or other-derogation (rivalry pathway) in accordance with these appraisals. Each pathway has unique consequences for how narcissists are perceived by others, thus shaping their social status over time. The model demonstrates how narcissism manifests itself as a stable and consistent cluster of behaviors in pursuit of social status and how it develops and maintains itself over time. More broadly, the model might offer useful insights for future process models of other personality traits.

## Keywords

narcissism, social status, motivation, self-regulation

Grandiose narcissism (hereafter: narcissism) is a personality trait marked by beliefs of personal superiority and a sense of entitlement to special treatment (Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Narcissists (i.e., individuals with relatively high levels of grandiose narcissism) tend to go out of their way to impress others: They often groom their appearance to grasp others' attention (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010), brag about themselves (Buss & Chiodo, 1991), and showcase their talents and abilities in front of others (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). At the same time, narcissists are often combative toward others. In such instances, they are often perceived as confrontational, insulting, belittling, and intimidating (Holtzman, Vazire, & Mehl, 2010; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993; Reijntjes et al., 2016).

What ties together these distinct manifestations of narcissism? Specifically, what is it that narcissists pursue (the “why” of narcissism) and how do they pursue it (the “how” of narcissism)? In this article, we propose a framework that addresses both the why and the how of narcissism. Drawing insights from evolutionary and

motivational accounts of behavior, we propose that narcissism is rooted in a desire for social status. Drawing from self-regulatory processing models of personality in general and narcissism in particular, we propose that narcissism is manifested in sequences of status-pursuing processes.

Combining both perspectives, we propose a process model of narcissism, the status pursuit in narcissism (SPIN) model. The SPIN model posits that narcissists are driven by a dominant status motive, meaning that it overshadows other motives, such as the motive for affiliation. To fulfil this motive, narcissists engage in a series of status-pursuing processes: situation selection, vigilance, appraisal, and response execution. The model explains when narcissists engage in self-promotion (i.e., attempts to increase their own status) or other-derogation

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(i.e., attempts to decrease others' status). The model demonstrates how narcissism manifests itself as a stable and consistent cluster of behaviors in pursuit of social status and how it develops and maintains itself over time.

## Status Pursuit

Hierarchies are omnipresent in social settings and essential for group survival. They establish order and coordination and prevent intragroup conflicts because they dictate group members' priority in social influence, access to resources, and mating opportunities (Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, & Henrich, 2013). Hierarchies emerge in social transactions: Groups compare members' competence in domains useful for group survival and welfare (e.g., successful amassment of wealth or knowledge, higher intellect, or physical prowess; see Auger & Curtis, 2013; Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Mattan, Kubota, & Cloutier, 2017) and bestow differing amounts of social status (or simply: status) to these members. Status is the amount of prominence, respect, and influence an individual has in a social group. It is indicative of a person's position within a social hierarchy (Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015).

Because hierarchies offer higher benefits for individuals closer to their top, people are assumed to be fundamentally motivated to pursue status (Anderson et al., 2015; Barrick, Mount, & Li, 2013; Cheng et al., 2013; Mattan et al., 2017). Fundamental motives are universal, higher-order goals that are nonderivative of other goals, arise early in development, shape longer-term well-being, and can be satisfied across diverse contexts (Anderson et al., 2015; Dweck, 2017).

As status is comparative and relies on the judgments of others, it is never guaranteed and always potentially malleable. Status pursuit is hence a continuous process rather than a one-off endeavor. Individuals differ markedly in how they tend to pursue status (for an overview of personality traits related to status pursuit and attainment, see Grosz, Leckelt, & Back, 2020). They differ in the absolute strength of their status motive, the relative strength of their status motive, and the rigidity of their status-pursuing actions. Some individuals are satisfied with having an average level of status, whereas other individuals want ever more (Anderson et al., 2015; McClelland, 1987). Some individuals want status as long as it does not go against their motive to get along well with others (i.e., affiliation motive; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; McClelland, 1987), whereas other individuals want status even at the cost of getting along well with others. Some individuals pursue status in context-sensitive ways (e.g., boasting about themselves only in contexts that demand for such self-promotion), whereas other individuals pursue status rigidly (e.g., boasting about themselves, even in collaborative, interdependent

contexts). We argue, on the basis of the tenet that individual differences in motivation can build the core of individual differences in personality traits (Denissen & Penke, 2008), that individual differences in status pursuit are at the heart of individual differences in narcissism.

## Narcissistic Status Pursuit

Narcissism is defined here as an everyday personality trait characterized by a sense of heightened self-importance and entitlement to special treatment (Krizan & Herlache, 2018). Various features of narcissism have been discussed in the literature, ranging from agentic (characterized by assertiveness, beliefs of personal greatness, and feelings of superiority) and antagonistic (characterized by arrogance, quarrelsomeness, and exploitativeness) to neurotic (characterized by shyness, distrust, and shame; Back, 2018; Back et al., 2013; Crowe, Lynam, Campbell, & Miller, 2019; Grijalva & Zhang, 2016; Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Miller, Lynam, Hyatt, & Campbell, 2017). In this article, we focus on grandiose narcissism, a manifestation of narcissism characterized as a blend of agentic and antagonistic features (Back et al., 2013; Crowe et al., 2019; Grijalva & Zhang, 2016; Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Miller et al., 2017). By contrast, we do not focus on vulnerable narcissism, which is a manifestation of narcissism characterized by a blend of neurotic and antagonistic features (Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Miller et al., 2017). We also do not focus on narcissistic personality disorder, defined in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* as a "pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), a constant need for admiration, and lack of empathy" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 669). This disorder can represent extreme levels of grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, or both (Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Miller & Campbell, 2008; Miller et al., 2017). When we refer to narcissism or narcissists in this article, we respectively refer to grandiose narcissism or grandiose narcissists (i.e., individuals with relatively high levels of grandiose narcissism), unless otherwise specified.

Like others who have recently studied the narcissistic pursuit of status (Zeigler-Hill, McCabe, Vrabel, Raby, & Cronin, 2018; Zeigler-Hill, Vrabel, et al., 2018), we argue that at the core of grandiose narcissism lies the hierarchical and comparative perspective that is characteristic of status hierarchies: Viewing oneself as superior implies viewing others as inferior; viewing oneself as entitled to special privileges implies viewing others as not. This hierarchical view of the self in relation to others is what also distinguishes narcissism from self-esteem. Whereas narcissism and self-esteem both entail positive self-views, narcissism and self-esteem differ in the quality of these self-views (Brummelman, Thomaes,

& Sedikides, 2016). Self-esteem captures self-views of adequacy and worth, not self-views of superiority (Rosenberg, 1965). Unlike narcissism, self-esteem reflects a nonhierarchical way of viewing the self in relation to others (Brummelman et al., 2016; Harris, Donnellan, & Trzesniewski, 2018). Narcissism and self-esteem are usually only weakly or modestly correlated (Brummelman et al., 2016; Brummelman, Gürel, Thomaes, & Sedikides, 2018), with stronger relations for agentic features of narcissism and even negative relations for antagonistic features of narcissism (Back et al., 2013; Geukes, Nestler, et al., 2017). Narcissism and self-esteem also have distinct nomological networks. Higher self-esteem is generally associated with lower levels of internalizing psychopathology and interpersonal aggression, whereas higher narcissism is generally not associated with symptoms of internalizing psychopathology but rather higher levels interpersonal aggression, as well as interpersonal problems (Hyatt et al., 2018).

We argue that narcissists pursue status more strongly, more narrowly (i.e., at the cost of other fundamental motives), and more rigidly (i.e., even in contexts in which status pursuit is considered inappropriate) than nonnarcissists. Regarding the strength of the status motive, studies on implicit motivation (Carroll, 1987; Joubert, 1998) have found that narcissists often construct projective narratives indicative of power motivation (i.e., the need to influence others; McClelland, 1987). Narcissists also attribute higher importance to acquiring leadership, fame, and wealth than nonnarcissists (Abeyta, Routledge, & Sedikides, 2017). Both children and adults with narcissistic traits tend to set status-relevant goals, such as increasing in social rank, garnering respect, protecting their reputation, and influencing others (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992; Jonason & Zeigler-Hill, 2018; Thomaes, Stegge, Bushman, Olthof, & Denissen, 2008; Zeigler-Hill, Vrabel, et al., 2018). This concern with acquiring status also permeates imaginary life: Narcissists have been found more likely than nonnarcissists to have fantasies and regular daydreams of heroism, glory, power, and success (Raskin & Novacek, 1991). Because narcissists display a stronger motive for status than nonnarcissists, they may also pursue status more intensely than nonnarcissists do. For example, compared with nonnarcissists, narcissists have been shown to be more autocratic and assertive (Raskin & Terry, 1988), to brag more (Paulhus, Westlake, Calvez, & Harms, 2013), and to publicize their accomplishments more often (McCain & Campbell, 2016).

Regarding the narrowness of the status motive, narcissists' strong motive for status seems contrasted by a comparatively weak motive for affiliation. Indeed, studies on implicit motivation suggest a weak but negative association between narcissism and the construction of narratives indicative of affiliation and intimacy (Carroll,

1987; Joubert, 1998). Likewise, narcissists are less likely than nonnarcissists to set goals related to affiliation, such as catering for the welfare of their social environments or forming close interpersonal bonds (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992; Jonason & Zeigler-Hill, 2018; Thomaes, Stegge, et al., 2008; Zeigler-Hill, Vrabel, et al., 2018). The relative asymmetry between narcissists' status and affiliation motives is also reflected in imaginary life, as narcissism is not associated with fantasies of love and closeness (Raskin & Novacek, 1991). This narrow orientation on status might be backed up by narcissists' relatively lesser motivation and capacity to show empathy for others (Hepper, Hart, & Sedikides, 2014; Mota et al., 2019). Because narcissists' motive for status can often trump their motive for affiliation, they may pursue status at the cost of their emotional bonds (akin to a behavioral profile of unmitigated agency; Bradlee & Emmons, 1992). For example, narcissists have been found more likely than nonnarcissists to see themselves as superior to others, even to their significant others (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Krizan & Bushman, 2011), and more likely to be intimidating and aggressive (Raskin & Terry, 1988).

Finally, regarding the rigidity of the status motive, research shows that narcissists have an increased tendency to orient behaviors toward pursuing desirable outcomes and a decreased tendency to inhibit behaviors that might lead to undesirable outcomes (Foster & Trimm, 2008). As a result, narcissists tend to pursue status more rigidly than nonnarcissists do. For example, narcissists have been shown to be more likely to exaggerate their competences or lie to get ahead (Lee & Ashton, 2005), even when they know that the truth can be unveiled (Collins & Stukas, 2008). They are more likely to make high-risk investments (Foster, Reidy, Misra, & Goff, 2011) and will less hesitantly attempt to maximize short-term profits at the cost of long-term losses (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005).

Together, these findings suggest that the narcissistic status motive is manifested in a behavioral profile of pervasive status pursuit. This observation builds on early theoretical accounts of narcissistic behavior. Early psychoanalytic writings profiled narcissists as agentic and antagonistic individuals: Regarding the former, they have been depicted as adept at leading, impressing, and demonstrating their superiority but, regarding the latter, they have been depicted as aggressive, confrontational, and arrogant (Freud, 1931/1955; Reich, 1933/1949). More recent theoretical perspectives have similarly highlighted narcissists' agentic and antagonistic interpersonal behaviors, which may result in the acquisition of a high status (Back et al., 2013; Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Campbell & Foster, 2007; Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Sedikides & Campbell, 2017; Weiss, Campbell, Lynam, & Miller, 2019). To explain the

motivational roots of narcissistic behaviors, theoretical perspectives have underlined narcissists' craving for respect (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001) or need for admiration (Back et al., 2013; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) and thus indirectly hinted at a strong status motive. Tracing narcissists' need for admiration to fundamental social motivations and similar to our approach, a recent theoretical account posited that narcissism is characterized by a strong status motive contrasted by a relatively weaker affiliation motive (Zeigler-Hill, McCabe, et al., 2018). Building on this knowledge, we contend that a constellation of intrapersonal processes translates the narcissistic motive for status into status-pursuing behaviors. In the following section, we further outline a model that describes these processes and their temporal unfolding.

### The SPIN Model

How does narcissists' status motivation translate into status-pursuing behaviors? To address this matter, we present the SPIN model. The SPIN model zooms in on the moment-by-moment regulatory processes involved in narcissistic status pursuit. Regulatory processes are manifestations of motivation because they aim to reduce the negative discrepancy between people's current state and their desired end state, such that these processes trigger one another in the service of optimal motive fulfillment (Denissen, van Aken, Penke, & Wood, 2013). The output of each regulatory process can serve as the input of the next one (Carver & Scheier, 1982; Denissen et al., 2013; Gross, 1998). From this process-oriented perspective, personality traits reflect the consistent and relatively stable ways in which people engage in regulatory processes (Denissen et al., 2013; Winter, John, Stewart, Klohnen, & Duncan, 1998).

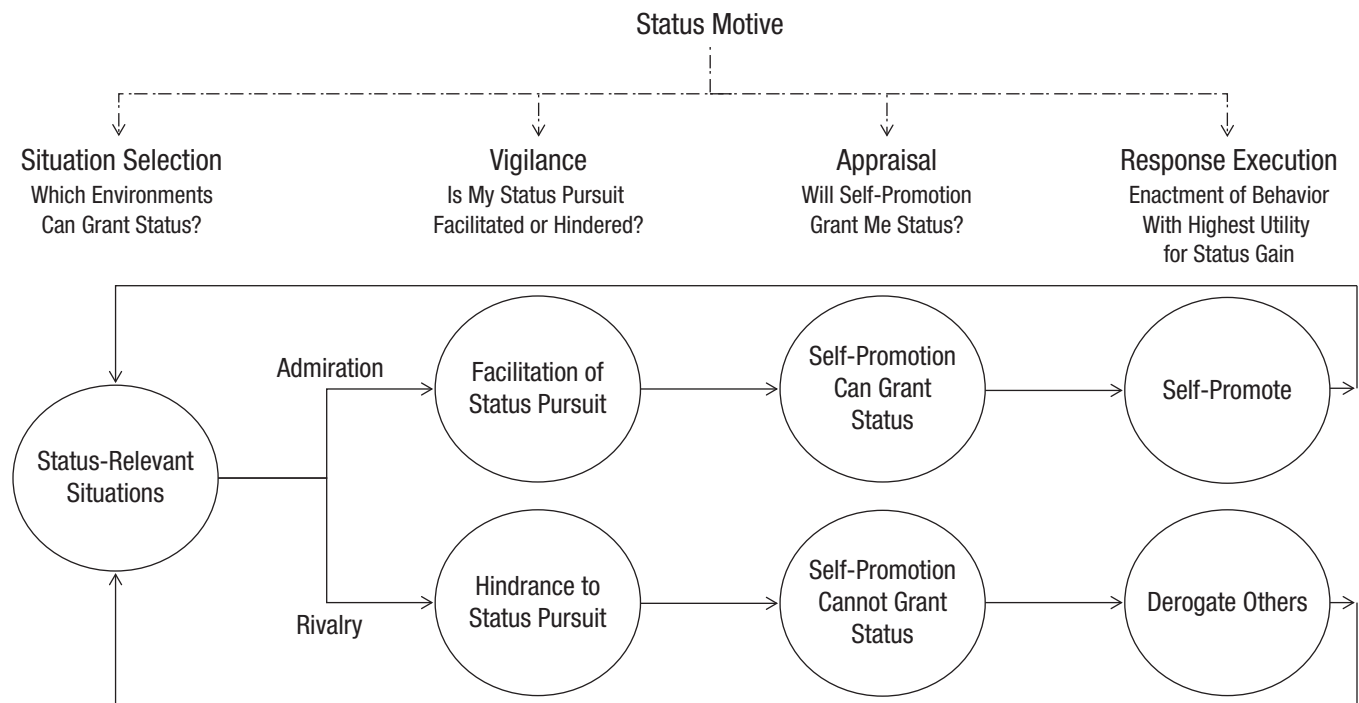
We posit that narcissism pertains to individual differences in a sequence of regulatory processes aimed at acquiring social status. In so doing, we build on core self-regulation processes (e.g., Baumeister, Schmeichel, & Vohs, 2007; Denissen et al., 2013; Geukes, van Zalk, & Back, 2018; Gross, 1998): situation selection,<sup>1</sup> attention (which we term *vigilance* for reasons outlined below), appraisal, and response execution. According to our model, narcissists tend to select social situations that appear to have the potential of affording a higher status. In these situations, narcissists are more likely to pay vigilant attention to cues that reveal their own and others' status. These cues can indicate the extent to which narcissists' status pursuit is facilitated or hindered. When assessing these cues, narcissists form appraisals about the relevant situational characteristics that determine how to obtain status: Can status be acquired through self-promotion (i.e., by increasing

narcissists' own status) or other-derogation (i.e., by decreasing others' status)? These appraisals inform the respective behavioral responses aimed at status attainment. Because social hierarchies are dynamic and hence potentially susceptible to change, narcissists may be inclined to monitor their status and repeatedly resort to these status-pursuing processes. Through repetition and habit formation, the processes we describe might over time form a consistent, self-sustaining, and relatively stable system (i.e., a trait) that manifests itself within person–environment transactions (Fig. 1).

Like other models of narcissism (e.g., Back et al., 2013; Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), the SPIN model conceptualizes narcissism as a dynamic system of regulatory processes. We extend these models in several ways. For the most part, existing models of narcissism have outlined its motivational nature (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001; Zeigler-Hill, McCabe, et al., 2018), its factor structure (Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Miller et al., 2017; Weiss et al., 2019), its self-regulatory strategies (Campbell & Foster, 2007; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), or its social consequences (Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Sedikides & Campbell, 2017) over time. Our model bridges these perspectives, showing how narcissism can be broken down into a sequence of self-regulation processes aimed at obtaining social status. Furthermore, our model builds on the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (Back, 2018; Back et al., 2013), which describes the self-aggrandizing (narcissistic *admiration*) and other-derogating (narcissistic *rivalry*) manifestations of grandiose narcissism. As such, our model makes predictions about when and why narcissistic status pursuit takes on an assertive, self-aggrandizing flavor or an antagonistic, other-derogating one.

Existing models (e.g., Back et al., 2013; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) often posit that the main motivational driver of narcissism is the desire to create and maintain an overly positive, grandiose self-image (i.e., an intrapsychic motive), which may manifest itself in attempts to garner positive information about the self, including admiration. Extending this notion, we suggest that narcissists' intrapsychic motive to establish a grandiose self-image serves a higher-order social motive—to obtain social status (for a review of intrapsychic vs. interpersonal motives, see Leary, Raimi, Jongman-Sereno, & Diebels, 2015). From an evolutionary perspective, humans have evolved mechanisms to navigate life in a way that maximizes their chances of survival and reproduction—outcomes that are often achieved in interaction with others (Leary et al., 2015). Thus, intrapsychic means typically serve interpersonal ends. Indeed, evolutionary models and research findings suggest that a grandiose self-image helps people accrue





**Fig. 1.** Hypothesized self-regulation model of narcissistic status pursuit. Once narcissists select or otherwise encounter a status-relevant situation, they are more likely to attend to cues that indicate whether the environment facilitates or hinders status pursuit. Perceived facilitation of status pursuit might activate appraisals about the heightened utility of self-promoting behaviors in granting status, leading to the enactment of self-promoting behaviors (admiration pathway). By contrast, perceived hindrance of status pursuit might activate appraisals about the heightened utility of other-derogating behaviors in granting status, leading to the enactment of other-derogating behaviors (rivalry pathway). Self-promoting and other-derogating behaviors might in turn elicit status-relevant reactions from others, thus triggering the processes anew.

social benefits by convincing others of their superior skills (Anderson, Brion, Moore, & Kennedy, 2012; Dufner, Gebauer, Sedikides, & Denissen, 2018; Kennedy, Anderson, & Moore, 2013; Von Hippel & Trivers, 2011). In that sense, narcissists' positive views of themselves may serve their overarching goal of obtaining social status.

An additional contribution of the SPIN model is that it specifies the moment-to-moment processes through which narcissists pursue status. As these processes are temporally linked, our model can be tested in field experiments aiming to investigate how narcissistic status pursuit might be modified. An implication of our model is that targeting earlier steps in the chain of self-regulation processes may be more effective in modifying status pursuit than targeting later ones. Finally, our model provides a unique window on the development of narcissism. Building on knowledge of when the motive for status becomes salient during development, our model outlines possibilities regarding when individual differences in narcissism can emerge, become socialized, and maintained over time. Before we describe these contributions in more detail, in the following section we review each of the processes that are outlined in our model.

## Situation selection

*Situation selection* refers to approaching or avoiding social environments that help or hinder goal pursuit (Gross, 1998). Such environments are selected on the basis of prior experiences in these or similar environments.

We argue that narcissists prefer, and thus tend to select, public and hierarchical social environments because these environments have a higher likelihood of affording status. Three strands of empirical evidence back up this claim.

First, narcissists tend to select public over private social settings because in such settings they can place themselves in the limelight of social activity and earn the status they pursue. For example, narcissists often select environments rich in social interactions, wherein opportunities for elevating their social image are abundant (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Perhaps for this reason, narcissists on average prefer (Jonason, Wee, Li, & Jackson, 2014; Kowalski, Vernon, & Schermer, 2017) and often pursue careers that enable them to be at the center of attention and rise through societal ranks. Consistent with these findings, narcissism levels are indeed elevated among actors (Dufner et al., 2015) and celebrities (Young & Pinsky, 2006).

Second, narcissists have been shown to choose hierarchical over egalitarian settings, provided they can gain status in these settings (Alba, McIlwain, Wheeler, & Jones, 2014; Zitek & Jordan, 2016). As hierarchical settings promote competition and reward superior competences, they are the natural habitats in which status can be obtained. Consistent with this idea, narcissism levels are elevated in wealthy individuals (Leckelt et al., 2019) and chief executive officers (CEOs; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006).

A third strand of evidence concerns narcissists' relationship choices. Because humans are a social species, relationship choices are an important feature of situation selection. Narcissists are more likely to choose relationships that elevate their status over relationships that cultivate affiliation. For example, narcissists are keener on gaining new partners than on establishing close relationships with existing ones (Wurst et al., 2017). They often demonstrate an increased preference for high-status friends (Jonason & Schmitt, 2012) and trophy partners (Campbell, 1999), perhaps because they can bask in the reflected glory of these people.

In sum, narcissists are more likely to select social environments that allow them to display their performances publicly, ideally in competition with others. These settings are potentially more accepting and reinforcing of narcissistic status strivings.

## ***Vigilance***

*Vigilance* refers to a chronic state of biased attention toward specific classes of environmental cues, which are often related to goal pursuit. Individuals are assumed to be especially vigilant toward environmental cues that convey information about how much environments facilitate or hinder their goal pursuit (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Vigilance can aid goal pursuit because it enables heightened processing of and responsiveness to goal-relevant cues (Schultheiss, 2001). Because vigilance requires prior knowledge of the extent to which cues can be relevant to goal pursuit, it also encompasses the automatic encoding of cues' relevance or irrelevance to goal pursuit (Pratto & John, 1991).

Individuals who pursue status tend to be more vigilant toward observable cues of their own and others' status (Anderson et al., 2015). We assume that the same applies to narcissists, who tend to closely monitor the social image they convey and wish to be perceived as admirable figures (Kowalski, Rogoza, Vernon, & Schermer, 2018; Zeigler-Hill, Vrabel, et al., 2018). To monitor how their pursuit of status is faring in their social environments, narcissists may vigilantly attend to cues that reflect how much status they earn through their behaviors. They might, for example, vigilantly observe the

amount of attention (e.g., holding others' visual attention) and admiration (e.g., receiving praise or eliciting expressions of awe) they earn, as well as the direct influence (e.g., others following their guidance) they exert compared with their competitors in the social hierarchy. After all, these cues can reveal the extent to which individuals gain, maintain, or lose the status they pursue (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009b; Cheng et al., 2013).

We also suggest that narcissists vigilantly attend to other people's efforts at status pursuit because these efforts can hinder narcissists' own status goals. For example, we expect that narcissists are more likely to deploy their attention to luxurious items others might possess, to external features such as physical attractiveness, or to others' expressions of pride and social aloofness. These observable cues are more likely to capture narcissists' attention because they are indicative of social status (Mattan et al., 2017). Likewise, narcissists may be more vigilantly observant of others' self-promoting or other-derogating behaviors, as these behaviors often reflect attempts to increase in status (Anderson et al., 2015; Cheng et al., 2013) and can thus signal a hindrance to narcissists' own status pursuit.

For the same reasons, narcissists may also be particularly sensitive to cues that convey hindrances to their own status pursuit. Such cues can range from those directly indicating a loss of status (i.e., being derogated by others) to subtler behavioral or lexical cues that reveal possible threats to status. Attesting to this, when primed with failure, narcissists tend to be faster than nonnarcissists in recognizing words associated with worthlessness—a finding suggestive of higher vigilance in encoding cues related to the loss of status (Horvath & Morf, 2009).

In sum, narcissists are more likely to pay vigilant attention to external cues of their own and others' social status. These cues can signal that a situation affords status and indicate the extent to which one's social environment facilitates or hinders status pursuit.

## ***Appraisal***

Goal-relevant cues can set in motion individuals' *appraisal* of the situation. We define appraisal as the assessment of situational affordances toward goal-fulfilling behaviors. Appraisals therefore direct the selection of goal-fulfilling behaviors (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Lazarus, 1993) in response to cues indicating that a situation is relevant to goal fulfillment.

Evidence suggests that there are two fundamental pathways by which individuals can gain status. The first pathway concerns elevating one's status by constructing a positive reputation of oneself. This is usually achieved through convincing audiences of one's superior

competence and worth (self-promotion, or prestige; Anderson & Kilduff, 2009a; Back et al., 2013; Cheng & Tracy, 2014). The second pathway concerns decreasing competitors' status by constructing a negative reputation of competitors. This is usually achieved through convincing audiences of competitors' inferior competence and worth (other-derogation, or dominance; Back et al., 2013; Cheng & Tracy, 2014). Narcissism is associated with the use of both behavioral strategies for status attainment (Zeigler-Hill, Vrabell, et al., 2018). We posit that, once narcissists find themselves in a situation that affords status (i.e., when their attention grasps status-relevant cues), they assess whether self-promotion or other-derogation is most likely to succeed in securing status. Situational cues indicating facilitation of status pursuit can trigger appraisals about the heightened utility of self-promotion, whereas situational cues indicating hindrance of status pursuit can trigger appraisals about the heightened utility of other-derogation.

We argue that, by default, narcissists tend to appraise situations as facilitating status pursuit and hence appraise them as affording self-promotion (Back, 2018; Wetzel, Leckelt, Gerlach, & Back, 2016). We attribute this tendency to narcissists' unrealistically positive, inflated self-views in status-relevant domains. For example, narcissists often believe that they are incredibly attractive (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994), even when others might think that they are not. Furthermore, narcissists often believe that they possess superior intellect, even when their actual IQ scores are not on par (Campbell et al., 2002; Dufner, Denissen, et al., 2013). Likewise, narcissists may think that they are exceptionally good at understanding others' intentions and emotions despite often being less capable of doing so (Ames & Kammrath, 2004; Mota et al., 2019). In addition, narcissists may think that they are highly creative, even when objective assessments might dispute it (Goncalo, Flynn, & Kim, 2010). Finally, narcissists often see themselves as charismatic leaders, even when they might disrupt group performance (Judge, LePine, & Rich, 2006; Nevicka, Ten Velden, De Hoogh, & Van Vianen, 2011). As a result of these broad, inflated self-perceptions, narcissists may be more inclined to appraise situations as affording self-promotion rather than other-derogation.

If narcissists are so strongly inclined to appraise that environments afford self-promotion, when might they attempt to derogate others? We argue that narcissists will be inclined to derogate others when they appraise that situational status demands exceed their resources for self-promotion. For example, when confronted by a formidable status competitor, narcissists might be more inclined to exert effort into defaming the competitor because doing so can potentially damage that person's reputation and thus decrease that person's status. The gravitation toward other-derogation is especially salient

in situations in which cues signal a strong hindrance of narcissists' own status pursuit. A large body of research suggests that when narcissists are criticized, humiliated, or outperformed by others, they seek to derogate them (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Horton & Sedikides, 2009; Kernis & Sun, 1994; Stucke & Sporer, 2002; Thomaes, Bushman, Stegge, & Olthof, 2008). In such instances, a strategy for reclaiming at least some status can therefore be to derogate or be aggressive toward the evaluator, with the purpose of punishing him or her or defaming him or her in the eyes of others.

It should be underscored that other-derogation is often viewed as less socially desirable because it is a strategy that establishes status through conflict (Cheng & Tracy, 2014). Narcissists, however, might be more inclined than nonnarcissists to view it as an acceptable avenue toward status attainment (Carlson & Lawless DesJardins, 2015) for a number of reasons. First, because narcissists tend to value status over affiliation, they might be less averse to the possibility of becoming disliked as long as other-derogation can grant them the status they pursue.

Second, because of their heightened sense of entitlement (i.e., their sense of inherent deservedness), narcissists might form exaggerated expectations of status acquisition (Grubbs & Exline, 2016). These expectations might eventually lead narcissists to underestimate the effort required to prove that they deserve to gain status. Research suggests that this might be the case, as entitled self-views are associated with an overestimation of the competence—and underestimation of the combativeness—that individuals display when pursuing status (Lange, Redford, & Crusius, 2018; Scopelliti, Loewenstein, & Vosgerau, 2015). As a result of their heightened sense of entitlement, narcissists might be inclined to view the hindrances to self-promotion as unjust, which could lead them to retaliate when they are not granted their desired status.

Third, narcissists' beliefs regarding their own superiority tend to go hand in hand with beliefs of others' inferiority (Back et al., 2013; Campbell et al., 2002; Kong, 2015; Krizan & Bushman, 2011; Park, Ferrero, Colvin, & Carney, 2013). These beliefs about others' inferiority might be triggered by narcissists' perceived hindrances to their own self-promotional efforts. Indeed, whereas narcissists have been found to attribute successes to internal ability more so than non-narcissists, they have also been found to attribute their failures to the incompetence of their evaluators (Horton & Sedikides, 2009) or collaborators (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000; Kernis & Sun, 1994). For the above reasons, narcissists might view their own derogating behaviors as justified attempts to claim or reclaim their rightful place in the social hierarchy and engage



in such behaviors when situational cues indicate that self-promotion is unlikely to grant status.

In sum, after determining that a situation affords status, narcissists can appraise whether the situation calls for self-promotion or other-derogation as a means of status acquisition. Because of their beliefs in their own inherent superiority, narcissists typically prefer self-promotion over other-derogation. However, when narcissists are unlikely to meet the status demands by self-promoting, they may derogate others (e.g., belittle them, lashing out against them). Narcissists may view other-derogation as permissible and sometimes necessary because they tend to downplay its social consequences and often view hindrances to their self-promotion as unjust.

### **Response execution**

*Response execution* refers to enacting behaviors that facilitate goal pursuit within a given situation. Responses are thus the behavioral outcomes of appraisals. We propose that narcissists are more likely to appraise situations as affording self-promotion and consequently more likely to behave in a more self-promotional, assertive attitude that aims to earn admiration, attention, and social influence (*admiration pathway*). However, when narcissists believe that self-promotion is less likely to grant status, they might follow a combative behavior that aims to devalue social competitors (*rivalry pathway*; Back, 2018; Back et al., 2013).

**Admiration pathway.** We propose that when narcissists appraise self-promotion to be a feasible route to status attainment, they use behaviors aimed at standing out. For example, narcissists might groom their appearance; they tend to prefer stylish clothing, luxurious brands, and belongings that they can publicly display to signal their high status (Back et al., 2010; Cisek et al., 2014). Narcissists might also try to stand out through their communication style, which often involves charming facial expressions, humor, as well as expressive and confident gestures that reflect their extraversion and self-confidence (Back et al., 2010; Paulhus, 1998; Tracy, Cheng, Martens, & Robins, 2011; Zeigler-Hill, Vrabel, et al., 2018). To draw attention to their superiority, narcissists often brag (Buss & Chiodo, 1991) and exaggerate their positive attributes (Collins & Stukas, 2008). Offline, narcissists might try to stand out by dominating social interactions, for example by interrupting or stirring the direction of conversations toward their accomplishments (Vangelisti, Knapp, & Daly, 1990). Online, narcissists might similarly try to stand out by dominating social-media newsfeeds with frequent posts of their exercise habits, diets, and personal achievements (Marshall, Lefringhausen, & Ferenczi, 2015; McCain & Campbell,

2016). Finally, narcissists might try to stand out through their acts. They might try to demonstrate their superior competences, for example, by showing off in the presence of potentially admiring bystanders (Buss & Chiodo, 1991), by striving to publicly succeed in challenging tasks (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002), or by publicly enacting altruistic behaviors, provided these behaviors increase status (Konrath, Ho, & Zarins, 2016; Konrath & Tian, 2018). While engaging in these self-promoting behaviors, narcissists may visibly experience a sense of pride, which outsiders may view as arrogance (Tracy, Cheng, Robins, & Trzesniewski, 2009).

When self-promoting, narcissists may sometimes trade off their pursuit of affiliation and the welfare of others. In one study, narcissists used a greater proportion of shared environmental resources in their attempt to supersede others in performance, ignoring the fact that their behavior would result in environmental costs and in a long-term depletion of the resources required to maintain their status (Campbell et al., 2005). Furthermore, narcissists have been found to more lightheartedly excuse their immoral acts (Egan, Hughes, & Palmer, 2015) and to ignore conventional behavioral rules such as following their boss's instructions in the workplace (Judge et al., 2006). In political positions, narcissists' tendency for risk taking may sometimes drive them to initiate bold legislative changes with relative disregard for the negative consequences these changes can bring about, as documented by research on narcissistic U.S. presidents' political acts (Watts et al., 2013). Such findings indicate that narcissists are more likely to go all in on their self-promotional efforts to acquire status.

**Rivalry pathway.** We suggest that when narcissists determine that self-promotion cannot grant status, they are more likely to attempt to establish status by lowering the status of competitors. Because they tend to value status over affiliation, narcissists may quickly resort to aggression when they feel bossed around, insulted, or humiliated, perhaps in an attempt to regain their social status. Narcissists can resort to ethically questionable and coercive behaviors to acquire status (Carlson & Lawless DesJardins, 2015; Zeigler-Hill, Vrabel, et al., 2018). Not only might they sometimes lie (Lee & Ashton, 2005), insult (Holtzman et al., 2010), and bully (Reijntjes et al., 2016), but they can also retaliate with physical aggression toward those that obstructed their status pursuit (for a review, see Denissen, Thomaes, & Bushman, 2018). For example, in a series of experiments, narcissists were more aggressive than nonnarcissists toward those who criticized or outperformed them (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Thomaes, Bushman, et al., 2008). Narcissistic aggression can also translate into direct physical violence outside the lab. A large body of evidence suggests that

individuals who do not meet the status expectations they feel entitled to are more likely to engage in aggressive behavior (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Denissen et al., 2018; Krizan & Johar, 2015; Rasmussen, 2016). For example, intimate partner violence is more likely when actors fail to meet narcissistic status demands (e.g., male perpetrators who earn less than their wife; Hornung, McCullough, & Sugimoto, 1981). Additional evidence shows that violent offenders display higher levels of narcissism than nonviolent offenders (Bushman & Baumeister, 2002) and that narcissistic prison inmates are, on average, more violent than nonnarcissistic ones (Lambe, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Garner, & Walker, 2018). Taken together, these findings indicate that narcissism can act as a catalyst of interpersonal conflict in the process of status pursuit.

While engaging in other-derogating behaviors, narcissists may be fueled by a sense of shame and anger. Indeed, frustration of status motivation tends to elicit shame (Shariff, Tracy, & Markusoff, 2012) and anger (Berkowitz, 1989). When narcissists are rejected by popular others, fail in the eyes of others, or do not receive the praise they expect, they might feel embarrassed or ashamed (Brummelman, Nikolić, & Bögels, 2018). In response, narcissists might turn the feeling of shame into anger (Thomaes, Stegge, Olthof, Bushman, & Nezelek, 2011), a phenomenon described as “humiliated fury” (Lewis, 1971) or “narcissistic rage” (Kohut, 1971).

**Summary.** When environments afford self-promotion, narcissists may engage in it to increase their status (admiration pathway). When self-promotion cannot grant status, narcissists may resort to antagonistic behaviors (rivalry pathway) to secure the status they feel entitled to.

### ***Social consequences of admiration and rivalry***

Because status pursuit is embedded in social transactions, narcissists' status pursuit can shape the way others relate and behave toward them. Adopting a person–environment-fit perspective, we suggest that the consequences of narcissistic behaviors are largely dependent on whether social environments are oriented primarily toward status (e.g., job settings) or affiliation (e.g., friendship settings). In status-oriented settings, narcissistic status pursuit might be especially advantageous for a continuous rise in status. In affiliation-oriented settings, however, narcissistic status pursuit might allow individuals to rise in status initially but can also lead them to lose status over time (see also Back, Küfner, & Leckelt, 2018).

**Status-oriented settings.** In status-oriented settings, individuals are often expected to strongly pursue status

but less so to pursue strong interpersonal bonds. Because in such settings the formation of strong affiliative bonds is often secondary and interpersonal relationships are often more shallow, narcissistic admiration can allow individuals to rise in status without necessarily becoming disliked. In fact, narcissists are likely to acquire a high status and become well-liked in short-term acquaintances and self-presentational settings because in such settings affiliative bonds are more shallow and less intimate (Back et al., 2010; Carlson & Lawless DesJardins, 2015; Dufner, Rauthmann, Czarna, & Denissen, 2013; Lamkin, Clifton, Campbell, & Miller, 2014; Leckelt, Küfner, Nestler, & Back, 2015; Oltmanns, Friedman, Fiedler, & Turkheimer, 2004; Paulhus, 1998). Narcissists may become liked in such settings in part because their narcissistic traits are often misperceived as self-esteem, which is generally desirable regardless of social setting (Giacomin & Jordan, 2018). This quick boost in likability and status that is associated with narcissistic admiration can be especially beneficial for navigating hierarchies. Because of their self-promotion, narcissists tend to be more preferred than nonnarcissists when applying for a job (Paulhus et al., 2013), and they have a relatively high probability of acquiring leadership positions (Brunell et al., 2008; Nevicka, De Hoogh, Van Vianen, Beersma, & McIlwain, 2011), even when they have less experience than their nonnarcissistic competitors (Nevicka, Van Vianen, De Hoogh, & Voorn, 2018).

Narcissistic admiration can thus facilitate a rise in social status with minimal (if any) social costs and may render narcissists more likely to occupy pivotal positions in society in the long term. Narcissism levels are higher among successful artists (Zhou, 2017), wealthier individuals (Leckelt et al., 2019), CEOs in general (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007), and high-paid CEOs in particular (O'Reilly, Doerr, Caldwell, & Chatman, 2014), and U.S. presidents (Watts et al., 2013). Thus, narcissistic admiration may be advantageous in the environments revolving around status (e.g., personal distinction, public recognition). In these environments, the admiration pathway can eventually make narcissists stand out in the eyes of others and render them more likely to get ahead of nonnarcissistic social competitors.

Like the admiration pathway, the rivalry pathway can be advantageous for individuals in status-oriented settings. Given that narcissistic rivalry is often viewed as less socially desirable, we propose that it might be useful in obtaining status when groups are faced with internal or external threats that endanger the group's hierarchy or survival. It is possible that the combativeness associated with rivalry is viewed as an asset of leaders in such cases: Rivalrous leaders might convey the impression that they will fight to protect the group from external threats and impose their will to maintain in-group order. Indeed, especially in times of economic

or personal uncertainty, groups have been shown to elect more dominant (Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017) and narcissistic (Nevicka, De Hoogh, Van Vianen, & Ten Velden, 2013) leaders. Furthermore, groups have been found to elect more dominant individuals as negotiators in zero-sum, intergroup debates (Halevy, Chou, Cohen, & Livingston, 2012). These findings suggest that in times of threat, narcissistic rivalry might be a less aversive or even a more desirable feature of the people elected as leaders. In such cases, narcissists may thus be at a relative advantage of ascending the hierarchy and maintaining a high status.

**Affiliation-oriented settings.** In affiliation-oriented settings, such as friendships, individuals are often expected to pursue the formation of interpersonal bonds but less so to pursue status. Consequently, in these settings, the strong and continuous pursuit of status might be met with increasing dislike. Although narcissistic admiration might allow individuals to increase in status and become more liked in early stages of interpersonal transactions in affiliative settings, it might be less effective in maintaining status and likability over time. Narcissists' rigid self-promotion is assumed to exhaust social interaction partners over time (Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Sedikides & Campbell, 2017). Indeed, narcissists may become disliked for their bragging (Scopelliti et al., 2015). Consequently, interaction partners may withdraw their admiration or respond to narcissists' demands for admiration with conflict. Narcissists might perceive such behaviors as hindrances to status pursuit, which may increase their rivalrous behaviors, thus often escalating such interpersonal conflict. The gradual emergence of rivalry in affiliative settings can eventually damage narcissists' relationships with others (Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Sedikides & Campbell, 2017). Studies focusing on the formation of affiliative bonds among previously unacquainted individuals found that, at early stages of acquaintance, narcissists were more likely to increase in status and likability. However, as interactions grew more intimate, narcissists were more likely to lose their initially high status and to become less trusted and liked over time, especially because of their antagonistic behaviors (Carlson & Lawless DesJardins, 2015; Küfner, Nestler, & Back, 2013; Leckelt et al., 2015; Paulhus, 1998). Therefore, narcissistic status strivings in affiliative settings might be less successful in garnering a long-term advantage in social status, while often damaging interpersonal bonds.

**Summary.** Our model is consistent with the possibility that narcissistic admiration and rivalry can be advantageous for status pursuit in hierarchical settings. By contrast, narcissistic admiration, and especially narcissistic rivalry, seems less advantageous in affiliative settings. In such settings, the continuous pursuit of status and the

gradual emergence of rivalrous behaviors may be responsible for narcissists' relative decrease in status and likability over time.

## Theoretical Implications

According to the model we have introduced, narcissism is expressed as individual differences in a sequence of momentary processes aimed at the attainment of social status. Because of the dynamic nature of social hierarchies, the motive for status can be satisfied only briefly. Consequently, corresponding motivations tend to reemerge throughout daily life, resulting in status-pursuing behaviors that become increasingly consistent and stable over time. As we argue below, our theoretical perspective can be used to identify processes (such as those pertaining to status pursuit) underlying personality traits. Moreover, it sheds light on how narcissism manifests itself across contexts, how it can develop across the life span and between contexts, as well as how its underlying processes can possibly be targeted experimentally.

### *Individual differences in status pursuit*

Humans do not pursue status in uniform ways. Evolutionary models of personality underscore that individual differences in personality traits can reflect individual differences in the strategies toward the attainment of social goals, such as status (e.g., Cheng & Tracy, 2014). Narcissism might have evolved as a psychological mechanism that facilitates the pursuit of status (Mahadevan, Gregg, Sedikides, & de Waal-Andrews, 2016) because findings show that it is consistently associated with the successful navigation of hierarchies.

Our model can provide insight into why narcissism might differ from seemingly similar traits that are also associated with the pursuit of status. Some scholars have proposed that narcissism belongs to a broader group of so-called dark traits (including Machiavellianism and psychopathy; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) that represent a tendency to "maximize one's own utility" while "disregarding, accepting, or malevolently provoking disutility for others" (Moshagen, Hilbig, & Zettler, 2018, p. 657). Although these personality traits are all linked to a relatively strong status motive, narcissism stands out as the trait most strongly associated with status motivation (Jonason & Ferrell, 2016; Jonason & Zeigler-Hill, 2018; Moshagen et al., 2018). That is, although individuals with psychopathy or Machiavellianism may pursue social status through the same self-regulatory processes as narcissists do, they probably do so with less intensity, pervasiveness, and rigidity. If this is the case, then they may pursue social status in more context-sensitive ways

(e.g., only in settings in which social status can benefit or at least does not hinder their pursuit of other important motives). For example, Machiavellians are also oriented toward status, but they are thought to mainly pursue control over others (Lee & Ashton, 2005). Machiavellians might thus engage in similar status-pursuing processes that narcissists do, but perhaps only in situations in which status can enable them to acquire such control (e.g., in their jobs but not in their intimate relationships). In that sense, antagonistic personality traits may, in part, reflect individual differences in the strength or dominance of the status motive.

### ***A within-person perspective on narcissistic admiration and rivalry***

A long-standing challenge in personality research has been to integrate process models of personality (i.e., within-person models) that predict why the same individual behaves differently from context to context with structural models of personality (i.e., between-person models) that predict why individuals tend to behave differently from one another (Baumert et al., 2017). Some researchers (e.g., Geukes et al., 2018; Hopwood, 2018; Wrzus & Roberts, 2017) have recently proposed broad, generic models of personality that address this matter, decomposing trait concepts into momentary state processes, the recurrence of which can lead to relatively predictable and recurring outcomes that are perceived as stable, dispositional trait differences. We hope that our framework can contribute to this growing body of literature by providing concrete examples of how such processes might operate in the case of narcissism. Our framework assumes that individual differences in narcissism can be conceptualized as individual differences in a sequence of state-like processes that emerge in interactions with the environment when individuals pursue status. Viewing narcissism as a recurring sequence of motivated processes can enhance our understanding of why it tends to present itself differently across contexts, why it tends to present itself in similar ways within similar contexts, and how it potentially develops over time (Denissen et al., 2013). Thus, starting from a sequence of within-person processes of status pursuit, the SPIN model outlines process outcomes whose recurrence can lead to the stabilization and development of between-person differences in narcissism.

This within-person perspective is especially relevant in understanding the distinct manifestations of narcissism. Recent years have witnessed an upsurge in empirical and conceptual attempts to pin down the manifestations, structure, and nomological network of grandiose narcissism. This upsurge has culminated in the distinction

between two interrelated trait dimensions: (a) narcissistic grandiosity (or admiration), which is correlated with agentic extraversion and sensitivity to positive rewards (i.e., high approach motivation) and can be manifested in self-promoting behaviors of status pursuit; and (b) entitlement (or rivalry), which is correlated with antagonism (i.e., low agreeableness) and can be manifested in other-derogating behaviors of status pursuit (Back et al., 2013; Crowe et al., 2019; Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Lange et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2017; Weiss et al., 2019; Zeigler-Hill, Vrabel, et al., 2018). Moving beyond this descriptive level, our model attempts to explain why these outwardly distinctive dimensions nevertheless represent the same construct, in what processes they differ, and how they might develop.

Extending existing theory, our model provides a motivational explanation of why admiration and rivalry represent the same construct (i.e., why they are both manifestations of narcissism). Scholars have suggested that admiration and rivalry share a common motive (i.e., the motive to become grandiose; Back et al., 2013). Extending this proposition, we suggest that the common motive underlying admiration and rivalry is the motive for social status. Preliminary evidence supports the idea that status motivation underlies both admiration and rivalry, as it shows that admiration and rivalry are more strongly associated with the status motive than with other social motives, such as the affiliation motive (Zeigler-Hill, Vrabel, et al., 2018).

Furthermore, our model illustrates why and how admiration and rivalry are distinct manifestations of narcissism. Our model holds that narcissists, after determining that a situation affords status, are more likely to appraise whether the situation calls for self-promotion or other-derogation as a means of status acquisition. Some situations might be perceived as facilitating the pursuit of status, possibly activating appraisals about the heightened utility of self-promotion and triggering self-promoting behaviors (admiration pathway). Other situations might be perceived as hindering the pursuit of status, possibly activating appraisals about the heightened utility of other-derogation and triggering other-derogating behaviors (rivalry pathway). Thus, moving beyond prior work on between-person differences in admiration and rivalry, our model illustrates why admiration and rivalry might reflect two distinct process outcome chains that fluctuate within individuals, depending on their appraisals of the social contexts.

Moreover, our model illustrates how individual differences in admiration and rivalry might develop through interpersonal transactions. Over time, the frequency with which individuals pursue status through admiration or rivalry may crystallize into more stable, trait-like patterns that represent between-person differences in admiration



and rivalry (Back, 2018). If individuals primarily feel they can keep on earning status through self-promotion, they might be more inclined to behave in an increasingly self-aggrandizing manner (i.e., they might develop higher levels of admiration over time). Evidence in support of this hypothesis shows that narcissistic self-views are momentarily increased when individuals rise in status (Mahadevan, Gregg, & Sedikides, 2018). Likewise, if individuals primarily feel that their status pursuit is hindered and the main avenue to status is through derogating others, they might be more inclined to behave in an increasingly other-derogating manner (i.e., they might develop higher levels of rivalry over time). Confirming the basis of these assumptions, daily perceptions of status gain have been related to admiration, whereas daily perceptions of status loss have been related to rivalry (Zeigler-Hill, Vrabel, et al., 2018). Our model hence offers an integrative perspective into how intraindividual differences in status pursuit can stabilize and intensify interindividual differences in admiration and rivalry.

We propose that admiration represents the “default mode” of narcissists, such that narcissists display rivalry mainly when their self-promoting efforts have been frustrated. This suggests that antagonistic strivings (which we label rivalry) are essential in understanding the spectrum of narcissistic behaviors but that their emergence might be more situational, such that they characterize some narcissists more so than others. Indeed, although dark personality traits (e.g., Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism) share a common feature of antagonism, this feature seems to explain a relatively low proportion of variance in narcissism (Moshagen et al., 2018). Moreover, latent class analyses identified two subgroups of narcissists: those characterized by moderate levels of admiration and low levels of rivalry and those characterized by moderate to high levels of both admiration and rivalry. They did not, however, identify subgroups of narcissists characterized by moderate or high levels of rivalry and low levels of admiration (Wetzel et al., 2016). These findings tentatively suggest that, without exhibiting high levels of admiration, people are unlikely to exhibit high levels of rivalry. Drawing from these findings, we suggest that narcissistic admiration is the most salient manifestation of narcissism, with rivalry primarily emerging when admiration is not sufficient to establish status.

### ***Development of narcissism across the life span***

Our model proposes that the strength of people’s status motive underlies their narcissism levels. Some models of personality development suggest that developmental patterns of personality traits are guided by changes in

motivation (e.g., Denissen et al., 2013). Thus, as the importance of status waxes and wanes across the life span, so might narcissism.

Current findings provide preliminary support for this hypothesis. Already from a preschool age, children start to reflect on their competences (Dweck, 2017) and compete with others for tangible resources (e.g., toys; Hawley, 1999). At this age, attention seeking and interpersonal antagonism have been found to be precursors of later narcissism (Carlson & Gjerde, 2009). Narcissism first emerges as relatively stable individual differences in self-views around the age of 7 years (Thomaes & Brummelman, 2016), a time when self-promotion gains ground as the primary route toward status attainment (Hawley, 1999), and children start to reflect on their social status through more realistic social comparisons (Ruble & Frey, 1991). Moving on to adolescence, mean levels of narcissism increase (Klimstra, Jeronimus, Sijtsma, & Denissen, 2018). This increase might be facilitated by physical changes such as rising testosterone levels (Braams, van Duijvenvoorde, Peper, & Crone, 2015), which might strengthen the motive for status during adolescence (see Terburg & van Honk, 2013; Yeager, Dahl, & Dweck, 2018). Social status indeed becomes highly important during this period (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010) and is salient in adolescents’ fantasies: Adolescents seem preoccupied with their social image and appear to believe that others are constantly evaluating them (Elkind, 1967). Given the high competition for status in adolescence, adolescents may be susceptible to resort to both self-promotion and other-derogation in their efforts to establish their status in the peer group (Olthof, Goossens, Vermande, Aleva, & van der Meulen, 2011).

Mean levels of narcissism continue to increase (Klimstra et al., 2018)—or at least do not decrease (Grosz et al., 2017)—during young adulthood, because narcissism might have an adaptive function at this age. Narcissism might be beneficial not only for young adults’ amassment of sexual experiences (because narcissists are perceived as attractive; Dufner, Rauthmann, et al., 2013) but also for job acquisition. As unemployment rates in young adulthood are much higher than for other age groups (e.g., Eurostat, 2018), the competition for jobs may be fierce at this age. To land a job, young adults are often required to convince a potential employer—usually during a brief, self-presentational interview—that they are confident, ambitious, and talented. This sort of self-promotion often makes narcissists, who tend to thrive in self-presentational settings, the most appealing job candidates (Paulhus et al., 2013).

Cross-sectional evidence suggests that from young adulthood onward, narcissism tends to decline gradually (Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003; Klimstra et al.,



2018; Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2008). After young adulthood, individuals might have acquired a more consolidated status in their social environments (e.g., they usually have finished their academic development and have found employment), whereas goals pertaining to affiliation and intimacy (e.g., finding a long-term partner, procreating, spending more time with loved ones) might become more salient (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Erikson, 1959). Such a motivational shift from status to affiliation goals may also explain why narcissism tends to be on average less and less desirable as adults grow older (Berenson, Ellison, & Clasing, 2017).

Consistent with our model, these findings suggest that mean-level changes in narcissism across the life span may reflect developmental changes in the motivation to obtain social status. Narcissism seems to rise when status goals become more important but to fall when status goals become less important. Future research could examine this possibility directly, for example by examining whether mean-level changes in narcissism are mediated by mean-level changes in the salience of status goals across the life span.

### ***Development of individual differences in narcissism***

Because we argue that status motivation underlies the development of narcissism, our theoretical framework can also contribute to the understanding of how individual differences in narcissism might develop through the reinforcement of status pursuit across social environments. Narcissism is partly heritable (for a review, see Luo & Cai, 2018). At the same time, the development of narcissism is also thought to be shaped by socialization experiences (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1971; Millon, 1969). Parents may reinforce narcissism by reinforcing the pursuit of status, and initial evidence supports this assumption. Narcissism seems to be cultivated, in part, by parental overvaluation, which is defined as parents seeing their child as more special and more entitled than others (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, & Bushman, 2015). Overvaluing parents on average overestimate children's IQ scores, overclaim children's knowledge, and overpraise children's mathematics performances, while pressuring their child to stand out from others (e.g., by giving them a unique, uncommon first name; Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, & Bushman, 2015). Thus, overvaluing parents seem concerned with their children's social status. Parental overvaluation predicts narcissism in children over time, even when parents' own narcissism, which is associated with parental overvaluation, is taken into account. This finding suggests that overvaluation might indeed influence the

development of narcissism above and beyond genetic transmission (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, & Bushman, 2015). Genetically informed studies should corroborate this.

Consistent with our model's suggestion that status goals can direct the development of narcissism, some theories suggest that narcissism represents a sense of self defined primarily by external validation (Kohut, 1971; Winnicott, 1960). It is possible that parents of narcissistic children explicitly encourage them to value and pursue status, for example by pushing their children to stand out from others, by emphasizing the status-enhancing nature of their children's accomplishments, or by making their approval of children conditional on the children's attainment of a high status. When children gain status, parents may lavish them with praise (Brummelman, Nelemans, Thomaes, & Orobio de Castro, 2017), but when children lose status, parents may become cold (Otway & Vignoles, 2006) or even hostile toward them (Wetzel & Robins, 2016). Indeed, the experience that parents' regard is conditional might be an important factor in the early development of narcissism (Assor & Tal, 2012; Brummelman, 2018), and future studies could explore this possibility directly by zeroing in on parent-child transactions.

Research on the development of individual differences in narcissism is still in its infancy. By proposing that the reinforcement of status motivation in the family might contribute to narcissism, our model creates an overarching framework that abridges theoretical suggestions and findings from socialization research on narcissism. In addition, our model generates novel hypotheses for future research, such as that narcissism may be reinforced across the life span by settings that reinforce status pursuit, even outside of the family. Narcissists might compete for status in their peer groups (Poorthuis, Slagt, van Aken, Denissen, & Thomaes, 2019), sports teams (Roberts, Woodman, & Sedikides, 2018), and occupational settings (Grijalva, Harms, Newman, Gaddis, & Fraley, 2015). As they move to increasingly high-status positions, their narcissism levels may further rise (Mahadevan et al., 2018). Combined with genetically informed studies, studies that address the lifelong socialization of status motivation might advance our knowledge of why and how some individuals might become more narcissistic than others.

### **Future Directions: Toward a Systematic Validation of the Model**

The central premise of the SPIN model is that narcissism becomes manifested as individual differences in how people pursue status. These differences manifest themselves in core self-regulation processes: situation selection, vigilance, appraisal, and response execution, driven

by an underlying status motive. Not all of these processes have received the same amount of empirically scrutiny in relation to narcissism, however. There is considerable evidence for the associations between narcissism and status motivation, situation selection, and response execution (e.g., self-promoting and other-derogating behaviors). By contrast, despite theoretical propositions (e.g., Cisek et al., 2014) and indirect evidence (e.g., Horvath & Morf, 2009) vigilance has not been studied in relation to narcissism. Likewise, despite theoretical propositions (e.g., Coleman, Pincus, & Smyth, 2019) and indirect evidence (e.g., Birkás, Gács, & Csathó, 2016), appraisals have not been studied in relation to narcissism. Future research should examine these proposed processes in narcissistic status pursuit. Although it will be important to isolate these processes in laboratory experiments, perhaps the most exciting prospect will be to examine how all proposed processes unfold over time in people's lives. We propose both longitudinal and experimental tests of these processes.

### ***Longitudinal tests of the model***

Given that the SPIN model focuses on the moment-by-moment processes through which narcissists pursue status, we believe intensive longitudinal designs are well suited to test it. In such designs, researchers should assess the self-regulatory processes that our model proposes in real life, as they unfold in narcissists' actual social interactions. This would allow researchers to test core assumptions of the model simultaneously.

One core assumption of our model is that narcissism is reflected in distinct self-regulation processes of status pursuit. According to the model, these processes can explain when individuals might engage in admiration and when individuals might engage in rivalry in their daily status pursuits. A challenge for the field will be to develop precise and sensitive measures for the self-regulation processes that underlie narcissistic status pursuit. To address this issue, future studies could use multiple sources of information in conjunction with self-reports to measure each process in the moment. Experience-sampling designs allow researchers to track these moment-by-moment processes in real time. Smartphones have allowed researchers to directly notify participants to fill out self-reports of their momentary experiences (Harari et al., 2016; Wrzus & Mehl, 2015), which may be particularly useful in tracking individuals' vigilance and appraisals of their social contexts. To examine vigilance, researchers could measure how much individuals report being on the lookout for cues of status facilitation and status hindrance. To examine status-relevant appraisals, researchers could measure how much individuals appraise the situation as facilitating or

hindering status pursuit. In addition to gathering such self-report data, studies could also benefit from using additional smartphone data, such as participants' phone calls, text messages, location information, and Bluetooth connections, and they may use smartphones to record snippets of participants' everyday conversations (Mehl, 2017). These valuable data can allow researchers to examine, for example, situation selection (e.g., where, or with whom, a person was) or interpersonal status-pursuing behaviors (e.g., whether they were bragging about themselves or spreading gossip about others; Harari et al., 2016). Combined with peer reports and direct observations, these data could add another layer of information regarding when individuals engage in admiration and when individuals engage in rivalry, as well as on the social consequences of these behaviors.

Our model also suggests that if individuals engage in these status-pursuing processes repeatedly, then these processes might crystallize into traits over time. Thus, the more individuals engage in the processes associated with admiration, the more likely they might be to develop higher levels of trait admiration over time. Likewise, the more individuals engage in the processes associated with rivalry, the more likely they might be to develop higher levels of trait rivalry over time. To test the long-term development of individual differences in admiration and rivalry, researchers should examine whether the proposed self-regulatory processes (as assessed through intensive longitudinal measurements) mediate long-term changes in admiration and rivalry over weeks, months, or even years. Ideally, such studies should start from early adolescence, when status becomes increasingly important and the transition to high-school enables the formation of new social hierarchies (Brown, 2011), and extend to adulthood, when individual differences in personality tend to become more stable (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). This might allow researchers to uncover how individuals might change over time in the way that they pursue status through admiration and rivalry.

### ***Experimental tests of the model***

The predictive power of the SPIN model can also be tested through intervention. As the model proposes a sequence of momentary processes underlying status pursuit, experimental interventions (i.e., field experiments) can attempt to change each of those processes to examine their downstream effects on status pursuit (see Hofmann & Kotabe, 2012). To be sure, the interventions we refer to are not therapeutic plans or ready-to-implement psychological intervention programs. Our model needs more empirical scrutiny before it can be

translated to such plans and programs. Rather, we regard these interventions as tests of the processing steps that our model proposes. For example, if changing narcissistic appraisals affects the way individuals pursue social status (e.g., adopting the admiration pathway instead of the rivalry pathway) in their everyday lives, this would constitute evidence for our model. Researchers should be cautious when designing such interventions. Because status is a fundamental human motive (Anderson et al., 2015), such interventions might be ineffective or even backfire if they are designed in a way that frustrates status pursuit altogether.

**Situation selection.** Interventions on situation selection rely on the principle that environments, objects, or peers associated with an undesired behavior (e.g., drug use) automatically trigger the motivation to enact it and should thus be avoided (Anker & Crowley, 1982; Farabee, Rawson, & McCann, 2002; Ingjaldsson, Thayer, & Laberg, 2003; Mahoney & Thoresen, 1972). We have proposed that narcissists tend to select public and hierarchical settings because such settings can more easily facilitate status pursuit. In line with existing paradigms, future interventions on situation selection could test whether nudging individuals to select more affiliation-oriented over status-oriented settings in daily life can scale down undesirable instances of status pursuit.

**Vigilance.** Interventions on vigilance rely on the principle that withdrawing one's attention from cues that elicit specific responses can scale down those responses. For example, training individuals to withdraw their attention from stress-triggering social cues (e.g., pictures of frowning faces) and to orient it toward emotionally comforting social cues (e.g., pictures of smiling faces) was found to scale down physiological and self-reported stress levels (Dandeneau, Baldwin, Baccus, Sakellaropoulou, & Pruessner, 2007). We have proposed that narcissists tend to pay vigilant attention to cues that indicate whether environments facilitate or hinder their status pursuit. In line with existing paradigms, interventions on narcissistic vigilance could examine whether nudging individuals to withdraw their attention from environmental cues indicating the hindrance of status pursuit can make them less inclined to pursue status via the rivalry pathway.

**Appraisal.** Appraisals are especially suitable targets for psychological intervention, as they are the most direct precursors of behavior (Walton & Wilson, 2018). Relevant findings support this assumption. For example, encouraging individuals to appraise their elevated arousal during public speaking as a sign of coping rather than as a sign of stress was found to lower physiological and self-reported

stress responses (Jamieson, Nock, & Mendes, 2012, 2013). We have proposed that when narcissists infer that situational demands exceed their perceived resources to self-promote, they may resort to other-derogating behaviors. Following existing paradigms, future interventions on narcissistic appraisals could teach individuals to reappraise status-related setbacks as learning experiences that will strengthen their future status pursuits. For example, interventions could teach individuals to reappraise critical feedback not as a sign of their incompetence but as a set of suggestions that indicate how to improve their competence (for a similar rationale, see Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Yeager, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2013). Such interventions might eventually lead individuals to reappraise demanding situations as facilitating (rather than hindering) status pursuit, scaling down the appraisals leading to other-derogating behaviors.

**Response execution.** Interventions targeting response execution (i.e., focusing on direct behavioral change) are usually aimed at rewarding desirable behaviors and at ignoring or punishing undesirable behaviors (Anker & Crowley, 1982). Because social settings usually provide these rewards and punishments, we suggest that interventions on narcissistic response execution might be more effective if they target the social settings rather than the individuals within those settings. Individuals might be reluctant to abandon behaviors if these behaviors are still rewarded by their social setting. Interventions could alter the means through which individuals pursue social status, such as by affording status through prosocial acts. For example, school-wide interventions in which groups of students took a public stance against conflict (e.g., by giving public rewards, such as wristbands, to peers who engaged in friendly or conflict-mitigating behaviors) were found to reduce conflict behavior at the school level (Paluck & Shepherd, 2012; Paluck, Shepherd, & Aronow, 2016). Similar interventions can also be developed for other settings, such as organizational ones (e.g., through organizational campaigns that afford status on the basis of collaboration rather than competition). Another way of promoting behavioral change is by altering institutional policies to promote collaborative over competitive activities (see Tankard & Paluck, 2016). As a result, individuals may become more oriented toward "getting along" than "getting ahead," thus toning down their pursuit of social status.

**Summary.** We proposed longitudinal and experimental methods to validate our model. Intensive longitudinal studies should repeatedly measure each self-regulatory process of the model to uncover when and why individuals engage in admiration or rivalry in their daily lives and how individual differences in such status pursuit might,

over time, crystallize into relatively stable individual differences changes in narcissism. Experimental interventions should examine whether experimentally manipulating one of the model processes can change narcissistic status pursuit.



## Conclusion

Combining evolutionary accounts of social behavior with existing accounts of narcissism, we illustrated why and how narcissism is a system of psychological processes and behaviors aimed at fulfilling individuals' fundamental motive for social status. Placing a social motive at the center of narcissism allows for a better understanding of why narcissistic beliefs and behaviors have a social orientation, improving our understanding of why social relationships can be central in the development and reinforcement of narcissism. By pinpointing the self-regulatory processes of status pursuit and how narcissists engage in these processes, our model connects the literature on narcissism with the broader literature on personality development. The model provides a theoretical framework for studies into the similarities and dissimilarities of narcissism with other personality traits and for the development of precise interventions to curb socially undesirable aspects of narcissism.

## Action Editor

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The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

## Note

1. Some researchers suggest a process that follows situation selection, termed "situation modification." Situation modification is the process of altering a situation to align with one's goals. Because situation modification refers to actions taken within a situation, we discuss its associated behaviors under the "response execution" umbrella.

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